

The Qur'aan's Influence On Western Civilization

By Fouad Khatib

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News of religious humiliation of detainees in Guantanamo Bay's Camp X-Ray has introduced into contemporary American discourse the significance of the Qur'aan in the lives of Muslims.

While some on the political and religious fringe have attacked the Qur'aan, most Americans have exhibited curiosity, not hostility. In fact, more than 16,000 people of all faiths have already requested a free Qur'aan through the Council on American-Islamic Relations' "Explore the Qur'aan" program. (See: www.explorethequran.org)

Those who study the Qur'aan for the first time might also reflect on the positive influence that Islam's holy text has had on Western civilization.

The Qur'aan has the unique distinction of causing an ancient Semitic language, Arabic, to thrive as the language of learning for the better part of a millennium. While most ancient languages have either perished or been confined to the hallways of academia, Arabic continues to be a living language in more than two dozen countries. Arabic also formed the linguistic cornerstone of one of the greatest civilizations mankind has experienced.

The Qur'aan and the example of the Prophet Muhammad (sallallaahu layhi wa sallam), which gave Muslims a complete code of life, stimulated a belief in the importance of learning and inspired Arab-Muslim civilization to direct its creative energies into literary and scientific pursuits. Muslim science, mathematics, literature and medicine became the best in the world.

To understand how the Qur'aan influenced civilizations, one should study the evolution of the Renaissance, the great revival of learning in 14th century Europe that had its origins in the interactions between the "Christian" West and the lands of Islam. For centuries preceding the Renaissance, Islamic Spain offered fertile intellectual ground from which sprang an enormous wealth of knowledge.

The famous libraries of Baghdad preserved in Arabic translations great Latin works of literature that were banned by the Church. Muslim Spain preserved the intellectual content of the Greco-Roman civilization that was later rediscovered by the West.

This vast knowledge base became the springboard for the Renaissance. The genesis of the Renaissance lies in the translation into Latin of books in all branches of knowledge then extant in the Arabic language.

Some precepts of law familiar to us today were also inspired by the Qur'aanic code. Its influence on the international law is characterized by strict limitations on warfare, prohibition of harming of civilians or destruction of trees and crops, and adherence to treaties.

Distinguishing criminal intent from criminal action was first advanced by Islamic law. Consequently, children and the insane could not be prosecuted as they were deemed incapable of harboring criminal intent.

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The Magna Carta and English common law were also influenced by the Qur'aanic code. Pope Sylvester II graduated from a Spanish university with a degree in Islamic Law. He went on to translate Islamic legal texts into Latin and called it the "New Roman Law." This code became the basis for the French legal system as well as that of Louisiana.

On the social and civic front, a profound contribution of the Qur'aanic code was the explicit banning of racism, which provided a practical framework for thriving multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies exemplified by the peaceful coexistence of different peoples in Muslim Spain.

In the 8th century Iraq, entire schools of grammarians in Baghdad, Basra and Kufa minutely scrutinized the Qur'aan in an effort to elucidate its meanings. This led to the formal scrutiny of the Arabic language itself. Some significant outcomes of this intense linguistic exploration were the development of lexicography, rules of grammar and cryptology.

Only a serious study of the Qur'aan and its influence on history can help one truly understand why more than a billion human beings revere this book as their revealed scripture. Polemics and hostile rhetoric, apart from being distasteful, do little to further understanding or mutual respect.

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